

**Remarks of the Honorable Jonathan J. Rikoon, Member of the United States
Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad
Fastiv Mass Grave I Memorial Dedication Ceremony
September 14, 2011, Fastiv, Ukraine**

First, let me acknowledge the presence with us today of Svitlana Voloshko, Chair of Fastiv Jewish community; Ella Sheinfayn, Honorary Chair of Fastiv Jewish community; Oleksandr Penkovoy, Mayor of Fastiv; Anatoliy Girchenko, Advisor to the Mayor of Fastiv; Svitlana Yankovska, Deputy Mayor on ethnic and religious communities affairs; Josef Zissels, Chairman of VAAD of Ukraine; Lev Shpilsky, Executive Director of VAAD; Natalya Fesenko, Director of Fastiv School #4, which has maintained the burial site; Fastiv School #4 teachers, who have strengthened the spirit of tolerance among the school children; Fastiv School #4 Students; Clergymen and members of Fastiv Christian Catholic church; Philip Carmel, Executive Director of the Lo Tishkach Foundation; Matt Stafford of the U.S. Embassy in Kiev – I am honored to join you here today.

Seventy years ago, the Nazis occupying Fastiv transported most of the adults Jews to Belaya Tserkov and built a special ghetto for Fastiv's Jewish children, near where modern school number five now stands. Between 1941 and 1942, here and in the nearby forest, those children were slaughtered along with Jewish residents of the nearby suburb of Kadlubitsa and refugees from Zhitomir. In all, the bodies of 500 Jewish victims from this community were buried on this spot in Fastiv. The mass grave for adults is to your left; the mass grave for the children is to your right.

To its credit, Fastiv – under the leadership of nearby school number 4, and unlike most other communities in Eastern Europe – sealed and marked the mass graves with concrete slabs, protected them with fences, and preserved this killing field intact. During the Soviet era, a plaque was erected commemorating those who had been murdered as victims of “the German-Fascist Invaders.” There is no indication on that plaque, however, that the victims were Jewish.

What happened to the Jews of Fastiv in 1941 and 1942 was an atrocity that must never be forgotten. I know the administration and teachers of school #4 have preserved this memory for your students. The men, women and children who were executed and buried here were victims of systemic state terrorism that still echoes today. Indeed, the Nazi genocide of the Jews of Ukraine in hundreds of towns and villages changed the face of this country forever.

Now, let me tell you why I am here today.

The United States of America is a nation of immigrants; almost all of our people came from somewhere else. (My own great-grandfather came to America in 1904 from within 200 kilometers of here.) This means that many sites that are part of the ancestral

cultural heritage of our population are in other countries. The Government of the United States, therefore, has a substantial interest on behalf of its citizens in the protection and preservation of these sites.

In 1985, our government recognized a particular problem with the protection and preservation of cemeteries, monuments, and historic buildings in Central and Eastern Europe related to citizens who were Jewish: Most of the Jews of the region were expelled, killed or fled during the Holocaust. Many who survived and initially remained in their countries later left because of post-war pogroms and Communist repression. The consequence was that the people who would otherwise have cared for the sites were no longer there.

The problem was especially serious in the case of burial places. Human remains and burial places are sacred in perpetuity in the Jewish religion. There is no ground more hallowed than a cemetery. But even after the Nazi destruction, atheist Communist authorities were insensitive to preservation of religious sites. Burial sites were developed for other purposes or allowed to deteriorate. Again, Fastiv is a noble exception in preserving this mass grave as well as the nearby Jewish cemetery.

For these reasons, in 1985 the United States government established a Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, on which I am privileged to serve, in order to help protect and preserve cemeteries, monuments, and historic buildings in Central and Eastern Europe associated with the heritage of Americans. The sites are not limited to Jewish-related sites, but Jewish sites are a major focus.

As part of its mission, the Commission negotiated a bilateral agreement signed by the Secretary of State of the United States and the Foreign Minister of Ukraine in the presence of the Presidents of both governments (Clinton and Kravchuk) in 1994, and it has contacted Ukrainian authorities regarding threats to numerous specific sites over the years since then.

When we in America think of the brutality, terror and genocide of the Holocaust, we think of the concentration camps that Germany established throughout Europe for Jews and others the Nazis thought undesirable, to use them as slave labor, and to murder millions of them. But, here in Ukraine, the Nazi plan for the annihilation of the Jews of Europe was begun by German troops who rounded up people and horrifically killed them, and often buried them in unmarked shallow mass graves, on the spot. One and a half million Ukrainian Jews were killed in this way, men, women and children, elderly and young alike.

The U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad several years ago conducted a field survey of Jewish-related sites in Ukraine and identified

approximately 500 Holocaust mass graves in the country, along with cemeteries and synagogues.

A year or two ago, the Lo Tishkach Foundation, which is a joint initiative of the Conference of European Rabbis and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, sent researchers to Jewish mass graves and cemeteries in the Kiev Oblast and identified many that needed to be marked, properly memorialized, protected, or preserved. Their work complemented similar efforts by VAAD under its program known as “Memory of Holocaust.”

The need at many of the sites was more proper memorialization. As happened here in Fastiv, Communist party authorities had erected memorials that referred to victims of the fascists but failed to mention the reasons that the victims were killed: their religion was Judaism. Proper memorialization expresses our respect for the dead and our refusal to forget the evil slaughter.

The U.S. Commission has undertaken responsibility to arrange for the funding of the needed restoration and commemoration work at many of the sites identified by the Lo Tishkach Foundation. I agreed to fund several of the projects. One is here in Fastiv. The implementation of this new memorial and this dedication ceremony is a joint project of Lo Tishkach and VAAD. Let me give special recognition and appreciation to Project Coordinator Yana Yanover, who unfortunately was unable to join us today.

Last Sunday, when I left New York, was the tenth anniversary of an event that served as a wake-up call to many in America and throughout the world. The only sights and sounds all day on radio and television were memorials of that traumatic event. The unprovoked terrorist attacks on innocent civilians on September 11, 2001, brought to American soil for the first time a small fraction of the mass murder of innocents that took place in Europe during the war. I will never forget watching from my office window in Manhattan as the burning towers collapsed like a stack of pancakes in a cloud of black dust. Painful as the attacks were for Americans, they cannot be compared to the enormity of the Nazi holocaust.

But the fanatics who perpetrated the unprovoked attacks on civilians on 9/11, like the Nazis before them, have an existential, irrational and indelible hatred for Jews. Unfortunately, violent, indeed vicious, anti-Semitism and other racism and extremism remains alive and in some senses flourishes notwithstanding the lessons of the Holocaust. Let us hope we all remain vigilant in fighting this rabid hatred and the terrorism it brings in its wake.

Last week’s Torah reading tells us that we may not forgive or even forget – “lo tishkach” – the nation of Amalak. That is the prototype for mindless anti-Semitism, for attacking the weakest, most defenseless victims merely because of their religion, and for hatred with which, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of the United Kingdom tells us,

compromise is impossible because it is not based on any rationality or facts. Unfortunately, Amalak reappears throughout history, clothed more recently in the swastika and other terrorist garb.

Thank you all for your commitment to honoring and recognizing the dead and protecting their resting place. I am proud to have been able to support this project, and again I thank the Lo Tishkach Foundation and VAAD for their surveys, for the design and fabrication of this monument, for this dedication ceremony, and for bringing this project to the attention of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Aboard.